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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KAMPALA 000041

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [UG](#)  
SUBJECT: UGANDA'S SHRINKING PRESS FREEDOMS

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CLASSIFIED BY: Aaron Sampson, Pol/Econ Chief; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: On January 6, the Ugandan Human Rights Network for Journalists (HRNJ) declared 2009 "the worst year" for Ugandan journalists since press restrictions were lifted in the early 1990s. According to HRNJ, 18 journalists were fired during the year due to government pressure and more than 80 were deprived of their rights. This year is shaping up to be another difficult one for Ugandan journalists, as police have already interrogated two journalists for reporting on civilian paramilitary training sponsored by the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM). On January 17, the Daily Monitor reported that a third journalist has received threatening telephone calls related to a story detailing corruption and kickbacks in Uganda's nascent oil sector. End Summary.

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Tough Year for Press Freedoms  
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¶2. (SBU) HRNJ identified the Ugandan Broadcasting Council and the police as the largest threats to press freedom in Uganda. HRNJ is an independent media advocacy network supported in part by the Danish development agency DANIDA, the International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX), and the Medial Legal Defense Initiative. In its annual report for 2009, HRNJ accused the Broadcasting Council of "arbitrarily" closing five radio stations and forcing the firings of 18 journalists following the deadly September 10-12 riots in Kampala. Radio stations closed after the riots included two Central Broadcasting Service (CBS) stations owned by the Buganda Kingdom, Suubi FM, Radio Two, and the Catholic Church-owned Radio Sapientia. All but the two CBS stations have since reopened under new guidelines strictly limiting their coverage of political issues. HRNJ accused the police and other security forces of illegally detaining 16 journalists during the September riots, and said several journalists were beaten and forced to delete from their cameras images of dead bodies or police brutality.

¶3. (SBU) HRNJ described nine journalists as "under police harassment" during 2009. All nine underwent multiple police interrogations during the year. The two senior editors of The Independent magazine - Andrew Mwenda and Charles Bichachi - were each forced to post bond more than seven times. Five senior journalists for the Daily Monitor were also forced to post bond several times. HRNJ reported that 21 journalists were charged during the year for the offenses of criminal defamation, sedition, treason, promoting sectarianism, and forgery. Seven cases filed by

journalists against the government were ongoing during the year. Radio personality Robert Kalundi Sserumaga, who was kidnapped and beaten by security forces for his reporting on the riots (ref. A), subsequently sued the Police's Rapid Response Unit (RRU) for torture and the Broadcasting Council for illegally depriving him and other suspended journalists of their livelihoods.

14. (SBU) HRNJ called on the government to take measures to protect journalists, eliminate intimidation, and investigate cases of harassment. The group warned that the "chilling effect" of government intimidation has already increased levels of self-censorship among journalists, thereby "undermining the power of the media to hold public officers accountable."

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Journalists Harassed for Reporting on Civilian Paramilitary Training  
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15. (SBU) In 2010, authorities have already questioned Daily Monitor journalists for reporting on the NRM's civilian paramilitary training program, known locally as "mchaka-mchaka." According to NRM deputy spokesman Ofwono Opondo, the NRM uses this training to indoctrinate and mobilize new party members. As part of the mchaka-mchaka process, uniformed Uganda Peoples Defense Forces (UPDF) officers drill squads of stick wielding civilians. Mission officers and others noticed increased mchaka-mchaka training in Kampala following the deadly September 2009 riots that left 28 people dead and more than 100 wounded. In October, the Daily Monitor reported that more than 1,000 people signed up for the training following the riots as part of "a renewed NRM government effort to equip Ugandans with basic military skills ahead of the 2011 general elections."

16. (SBU) On December 12, President Museveni presided over a graduation ceremony for perhaps as many as 2,500 new mchaka-mchaka trainees. Some of these graduates were issued uniforms and AK-47s for the occasion. In a December 20 article entitled "Preparing for the 2011 Elections by Arming the Troops," Monitor reporter Angelo Izama reported concerns articulated by opposition leaders and an unnamed diplomat that recent mchaka-mchaka graduates were specifically trained as election "watchers" or "scouts" to influence the February 2011 elections. On December 21, President Museveni accused the Monitor of scaring away investors and said: "These people of the Monitor, I am going to deal with them if they don't change their ways." On December 22, police questioned Izama for five hours for allegedly defaming the President and criminal libel. On January 11, police summoned Izama's editor, Henry Ochieng, for questioning. Ochieng returned for additional questioning on January 20 and is required, along with Izama, to check in with authorities once a week. Ochieng and the Monitor's Managing Editor Daniel Kalinaki also appeared in court in January to defend themselves against forgery charges related to an article on the Bunyoro Kingdom and President Museveni published in August 2009 (ref. B) .

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Journalist Threatened for Reporting on Oil Corruption

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17. (SBU) Another Monitor journalist, Richard Wanambwa, has received threatening telephone calls related to a January 3 story on corruption in Uganda's nascent oil sector. Wanambwa's article relayed excerpts of an internal Ugandan government security report alleging that an unnamed senior government official is poised to receive a significant kickback for facilitating an agreement between Italian oil giant ENI, Heritage Oil, and the Ugandan government (ref. C). On January 17, the Monitor reported that Wanambwa has received "phone calls from unknown people demanding that he drops further reporting on the issue or 'be dealt with.'" The Monitor also reported that "hardly a week ago, a minister who has been involved in a scandal over land related matters whispered to another reporter working with Monitor Publications that Mr. Wanambwa should watch his back."

18. (C) NOTE: The Monitor was clearly referring to Security Minister and NRM Secretary General Amama Mbabazi who was involved in a scandal over land-related matters in 2008. The threatening telephone calls described by the Monitor are nearly identical to threats received in December by a local anti-corruption activist, Jasper Tumuhimbise, following the publication of a booklet identifying Mbabazi as Uganda's most corrupt public official (ref. D). On January 14, Tumuhimbise told PolOff that he'd been warned that Mbabazi and Public Works Minister John Nasasira, who also figured high on the list of corrupt officials, were working on a plan to "handle" him. END NOTE

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Comment: Press Intimidation Continues

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19. (C) The continued harassment and intimidation of local journalists - through police questioning, spurious legal charges, or more nefarious means - is undermining press freedoms, increasing levels of media self-censorship, and limiting public debate. A January 21 editorial by the Monitor's Managing Editor, Daniel Kalinaki, noted that over 100 journalists in Uganda "today face some form of charge or sanction by the government." Kalinaki observed that while local radio talk shows are free to discuss President Obama's first year in office, the moment a listener calls in to talk about President Museveni, radio hosts cut off the call. "Apparently while it was okay for Ugandans to analyze the performance of a far-away leader they do not vote for," wrote Kalinaki, "the presenters considered it too risky for this and perhaps other callers to discuss the performance of their own President on matters that affect them. Of course the danger of the government thugs coming after critical media houses - even those that simply offer a platform for debate - is real." Kalinaki concluded that "the presenters on this radio station, like many Ugandans, have chosen survival over standing up for their rights." More and more Ugandan journalists and civil society activists will likely opt for survival in 2010 as Uganda continues to crack down on the handful of critics determined to stand up for their right to criticize their government.

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